

EMGT 835 FIELD PROJECT:
*Communication Standards for the Female Technical
Sales Professional*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Communication techniques to be used by female technical sales professionals (FTSP) with clients were explored by researching gender communication, technical communication, and sales communication. It was found that by combining these three elements, a female technical sales professional can use certain techniques with her entire client base, and focus on gender refined differences that will improve her communication.

The FTSP can use some communication standards with all of her clients, regardless of the gender or professional experience of the client. Similarities and techniques are presented in the areas of general language characteristics, one-to-one presentation techniques, sales questioning, and technical to non-technical professional communication.

Differences in communication techniques should be noted by the FTSP for each of her clients. These differences are most pronounced when the FTSP is communicating with the opposite gender. The gender refined communication approach notes differences in communication with each gender in regards to general language characteristics, sales questioning, and communicating with professionals with a non-technical background.

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To Randy, for support, encouragement, and inspiration.

And to my favorite furry research and writing companions, Willie and Josie.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE USED

Multiple references were used for this paper. Each reference focused on a different aspect of the research: gender communication, technical communication, sales strategy.

Gendertraps, by Judith Briles discussed the role of gender in the workplace. The author discusses research into gender roles in the workplace, including gender communication. Some items discussed include body language, conflicts, listening, assertiveness, and the role of apologies.

Harry E. Chambers explores *Effective Communication Skills for Scientific and Technical Professionals*. He presents communication realities for technical professionals in today's business world. The author presents the components of communication and how to connect them. He also presents information on how to communicate technical information to non-technical people.

Genderspeak by Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin presents gender communication techniques. It provides an overview of male and female communication, including a history of gender communication. Theories were presented. Elgin discussed the role of body language in communication and how and why communication breaks down.

"SPIN" selling was developed by Huthwaite Inc., by a team of individuals headed by Neil Rackham. This sales technique is geared toward large volume and high dollar

sales and is used by companies such as Xerox and Motorola who focus on technical sales. The process focuses on how to use problem questions, situation questions, need-payoff questions, and implication questions during the sales process.

Gendersell, by Judith Tingley and Lee Robert presents a generalized approach on how to sell to the opposite sex. They discuss what consumers expect and want from a sales person of the opposite gender and provide generalized techniques for selling based on gender. The approach presented is not geared specifically to one sales industry. Items discussed include customizing a sale by gender, adapting to gender differences, women influencing men, establishing rapport, and building the customer connections.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every person has a unique thought process, perception, and behavior. Some people associate these traits with one's gender. Often, a female will respond to a product, service, or marketing strategy differently than a male. Knowing and recognizing these details can provide a strong advantage to each salesperson as they approach the sales process.

Selling is communicating. Differences in males and females are most often observed through communication. Communication is the primary vehicle a sales professional uses to influence customers. In technical sales, an approach for technical sales professionals to bring their product to everyday consumers with both technical and non-technical backgrounds is necessary for success.

Combining the elements of sales techniques, gender communication, and technical communication is the female technical sales professional's secret weapon. The Female Technical Sales Professional, or FTSP, is defined for this paper as a female graduate of an accredited engineering program whose occupation involves the sale of high-tech products or services.

The key for today's FTSP is to combine her technical background with a refined approach suited to the individual she are selling to. It is no longer a "one-size-fits-all" sales world – each buyer is different, with a specific set of needs. As the FTSP individualizes the sales process toward the gender and technical experience of the

buyer, she can meet these needs and ultimately achieve success. The FTSP Communication Approach will focus communicating with the individual characteristics of the customer. The goal is to prepare the FTSP for each unique experience. Because each customer approaches the buying process differently, the FTSP must use different strategies based on a combination of gender, personality, and professional experience.

This paper begins by exploring techniques in sales and technical communication. This includes general characteristics that are applicable to all sales situations regardless of the customer's gender. The "SPIN" sales process is discussed. Technical communication components and commonalities that can be used with both non-technical and technical clientele are presented.

Female and male communication styles are explored in Chapter 3. For each gender, specific language characteristics are presented and discussed. In addition, a communication technique specific to gender in sales called "Gendersell" is discussed.

Finally, the FTSP Communication Approach is described in Chapter 4, linking together the "SPIN" sales process and technical communication techniques with gender communication characteristics. The approach defines similarities and differences in communication the FTSP should recognize when communicating with each gender.

Today's FTSP must recognize that one approach will not work for all of her customers. Every sales situation is different, and as the FTSP notices this diversity, she will recognize each situation as a challenge and a new opportunity. (5) The FTSP

must adapt and recognize what communication standards will lead to a win-win situation for both parties – the seller gets the sale and the customer is satisfied with the product and the sales process.

CHAPTER 2

TECHNIQUES IN SALES AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Technical sales professionals come from a wide range of backgrounds and diverse experience. Some individuals have extensive technical training; others do not. This chapter first focuses on a selling technique called “SPIN.” Then technical communication is discussed, focusing on sales professionals with a technical or engineering background.

A. “SPIN”

A sale must be targeted to fit the needs of the customer, and therefore each salesperson must tailor the sale to the needs of the buyer. “SPIN” selling, developed by Huthwaite Inc., uses this approach. The technique is geared toward large volume and high dollar sales and is used by companies such as Xerox and Motorola who must focus on the technical sales environment.

A technical sale is defined as a high-value sale for this paper. A high-value sale is worth a dollar amount greater than \$1,000 and most likely involves a number of decision makers who will be held accountable by the end-users for the success of the product. (4) These sales usually require a series of calls by the sales person, and may even take several years to complete.

With large high-value sales, Huthwaite found that the sales person becomes a heavily weighted factor in the customer’s decision. In fact, the customer may view the

product and the sales person as one. Huthwaite found that “as the size of the sale increases successful salespeople must build up the perceived value of their product or services.” (4) Customers become more cautious as the value of the sale increases. This is due in part to cost, but also to the fear of making a public mistake that they will be held accountable for.

To obtain commitment from a customer is the salesperson’s ultimate goal. Obtaining commitment means determining the next step in the sales process, whether that is additional follow-up meetings or establishing a timeline for purchase. In large sales a salesperson obtains commitment by proposing a commitment. This involves proposing the next steps in the sales process. A salesperson must make sure that the commitment he or she proposes advances the sale and is also a realistic commitment for the customer to make. Huthwaite found that successful salespeople use a process that includes three distinct steps to obtain commitment from customers: preliminaries, investigating, demonstrating capability.

1. Preliminaries

Preliminaries include introductions and giving the first impression of the sales person and the product. To open a sales call, it is suggested that a salesperson focus on the objective of the call. This can be as simple as getting consent to move towards the investigating stage of the sales process. The steps that Huthwaite suggests include first stating name and business, then the reason for the call, and finally getting consent to proceed with questions. The key is to make preliminaries effective. A salesperson needs to get down to business quickly. Many business people only have a certain amount of time to hear about a product

or service. At the same time, a salesperson should be careful not to sell the product too soon. Instead, an initial call should focus on introductions, asking questions, and listening to the customer's needs.

2. Investigating

The investigating stage of the sale is considered the most important. Investigating includes asking questions to obtain information about a customer's needs, therefore gaining a better understanding of the organization. Huthwaite found that questions in a successful sales call fell in a sequence they defined as "SPIN:" Situation Questions, Problem Questions, Implication Questions, and Need-payoff Questions.

- **Situation Questions.** Situation questions involve asking data-gathering questions to obtain facts and background about the client.
- **Problem Questions.** Problem questions follow situation questions. This type of questioning explores problems, difficulties, and dissatisfactions in areas where the salesperson's product can help.
- **Implication Questions.** Implication questions take the information gathered from the problem questions and explore their effects and consequences. Huthwaite found that implication questions are particularly powerful in high-technology sales. "Many high-tech customers, perceive decisions as very risky because of the complex and rapidly changing high-tech marketplace. Under these circumstances, the customers have to see the problems with their present equipment as very severe before they feel

ready to risk buying something they perceive to be new and different...Customers mistrust high-tech salespeople, so they feel more comfortable with someone who holds back and tries to understand implications than they do with someone who jumps in with premature and often inappropriate solutions.” (4) To help in asking implication questions, Huthwaite suggests first writing down the potential problem the customer might have. Then, write down difficulties the customer might have related to this problem. Finally, a salesperson should write down questions that the difficulties suggest.

- **Need-Payoff Questions.** The final type of question is a need-payoff question. These are important because the customer tells the salesperson the benefits that their solution could offer, instead of the other way around. The purpose of questions in larger sales is to uncover implied needs determined from answers to implication questions and develop them into explicit needs. Need-payoff questions can be practiced. Huthwaite advises to practice need-payoff questions in safe situations, such as with friends and family, before using them in a client situation. A few generic need-payoff questions are (4):
 - Why is that important?
 - How would that help?
 - Would it be useful if...?

- Is there any other way this could help...?

The SPIN model is powerful because it asks questions that are important to the customer. As Huthwaite research states, “its questioning sequence taps directly into the psychology of the buying process.” (4) Questioning a customer involves a series of questions that progress from implied to explicit. Many salespeople already use the SPIN process without knowing it. The strength of the process comes from a “simple and precise description to a complex process.” (4)

3. Demonstrating Capability

To demonstrate capability to a customer, a salesperson must show that he or she has a solution to a problem or need and that he or she can make a worthwhile contribution to solve a customer’s problems. A salesperson should not demonstrate capability too early in a call. It is important first to identify the needs of the customer and check that key concerns related to the product and the customer’s needs have been addressed. Successful salespeople summarize the benefits of a customer implementing their product which helps bring key points into focus for the customer. In larger sales, these benefits show how products and services meet explicit needs identified by the customer. (4) By addressing the explicit needs of the customer, the customer is more likely to express positive statements about the product.

B. SPIN Implementation

The SPIN process requires practice for effective implementation. Huthwaite suggests first focusing on the investigating stages of the sales process. Asking questions will

develop the needs of the customer, which helps a salesperson show a product's benefits. To develop questions in the SPIN process, first decide if enough questions are being asked – is enough information being obtained about the customer? If not, focus on asking more questions. Plan and ask problem questions to identify problems, difficulties, and dissatisfactions the customer has had and is currently experiencing. As problem questions become more effective, move towards asking implication questions. Finally, start using need-payoff questions. To develop each type of question, a salesperson should stop and analyze his or her product. He or she should list all of the problems that the product is designed to solve, and how it solves them. Using this list, a salesperson should plan the questions he or she will ask during the sales process. Huthwaite suggested the following strategy to start SPIN model implementation:

- Write down a minimum of three potential problems that the customer may have that the product can solve.
- Write out examples of problem questions that uncover potential problems.

C. The Technical Communication Environment

Written and oral communication skills are not widely emphasized in a majority of engineering undergraduate curriculums, yet post-graduate job responsibilities require that engineering professionals communicate well with people of differing educational backgrounds, work functions, and personalities.

1. Technical Communication Realities

There are six critical communication realities for technical professionals presented in Harry E. Chambers book “Effective Communication Skills for Scientific and Technical Professionals.”

- Technical professionals tend to be more task than people oriented. This typically stems from “training, education, and thought processes that concentrate on technical development and focus more on tasks and less on interpersonal issues.” (2) The challenge comes when technical professionals are working and communicating with non-technical peers.
- Technical professionals may devalue the importance of other work and/or organizational functions. Sometimes jobs or functions that are not technically oriented are perceived by technical professionals as “unimportant or nonessential.” Too often this results in “ineffective communication between these groups, which can then become the root cause of animosities and internal organizational conflict.” (2)
- Technical professionals are highly motivated to achieve perfection. This reality has both positive and negative consequences. Though all companies want high quality and a good end product, the technical professional pursuing perfection can “lead to a stress on quality at the expense of other critically important considerations such as budget and time constraints.” It is difficult for the technical professional to accept that the overall company goal is not pursuing the perfection of a product.

On another note, when pursuing perfection, technical professionals often find secondary aspects of a task very interesting or challenging and therefore focus intently on resolving these. The overall project goal becomes secondary to meeting this new challenge.

- Technical professionals are expected to keep management and the team informed on all aspects of their work. The ability for a technical professional to move information to colleagues and clients and to help people with non-technical backgrounds understand technical information is the new challenge for the technical professional. In today's companies it is important for the technical professional to build relationships and be responsive to the political climate of their company, as well as the companies that do business with their organization.
- Technical professionals often communicate in a logical and linear manner. This type of communication pattern can contribute to miscommunication or interpreted as "abrasive or confusing." (2) Often, technical professionals center their communications on the actual message instead of considering the impact on the person receiving the communication. The challenge for a technical professional is to not focus exclusively on message content.
- Technical professionals are now communicating with an expanded customer base. Customers expect the technical professional to be meeting their needs and requirements, and the technical professional must convey

this information to them clearly and concisely. It is important for the technical professional to verify that there is mutual agreement between him or her and the customer and to make sure that both parties are fulfilling their obligations.

2. Technical Communication Components

Communication between two people takes place when one or a combination of four things happen. First, the speaker has something he or she wants to say to another person. He or she uses words and body language to convey this message. The listener hears the words spoken and observes the body language used. From these words and body language, the listener receives the communicated message. The dialog takes place as a package. Regardless of what the speaker is trying to communicate, the only meaning taken away from the dialog is what the listener understands the words and body language to have. (3) The listener bases a speaker's communication not only on words and body language, but also on his or her own background and thoughts including what he or she expects the speaker to say. In addition, the listener is filtering a speaker's communication through everyday events, senses, and emotions, such as how he or she is feeling or how well he or she can see or hear the speaker.

Every communication involves two verbal components. The first component is "content." The second component is "emotional impact." The content of the message is delivered by the sender to the receiver. "Emotional impact is the result of the message on the person or people on the receiving end of the information." (2) Inaccurately, a person assumes that everyone has the same

understanding of their message as they do. This is where a major communication disconnection occurs. “Effective communication takes place only when a bridge is built between content and emotional impact, connecting the two components and assuring that both are given equal consideration.” (2)

In addition to the verbal component of communication, a body language component is present in every face-to-face communication. Approximately 65% of the communication is carried by body language, including facial expressions, gestures, and body positions. (2) The tone of the voice also plays a significant role. If the tone is unpleasant, the communication will not be effective. Spoken words can have “their meaning canceled by body language.” (3)

3. Communicating Technical Concepts to Non-Technical Professionals

Technical professionals often have a very easy time communicating with other technical professionals. Both parties are familiar with the information that the other technical person wants and are able to communicate that information to them in a format with which they are comfortable. It can be challenging for technical professionals to communicate specialized technical information to non-technical professionals. The technical professional must step out of his or her comfort zone and use different communication techniques. Several tools are presented below to assist the technical professional in this type of communication. (2) The technical professional will find that these techniques will enhance their overall communication.

- **Analogies.** Incorporating simple analogies or examples into a technical conversation allows both technical and non-technical professionals to understand the concept using his or her frame of reference.
- **Outline.** All communications should be structured. A common approach is called a 3-step model: Preview, Present, and Review. This aids in leading the listener through the communication by first introducing the topic, presenting related information, and then reviewing what has been communicated. To determine what the main communication content should include, a technical professional should ask the listener what goals he or she has for the communication, or how he or she intends to use the information received. This allows the technical professional to stay focused on the listener's goals and communicate the appropriate information.
- **Detail.** The technical professional should involve the non-technical professional in determining the level of detail he or she requires. This can be achieved using statements such as, "I would like to find out how much information you need at this time" or "I can supply a foundation or background of information and identify resources for you to follow up with to increase your knowledge or understanding. I'll tell you where you can go to get further information." (2)
- **Visual Aids.** Using visual aids during a communication can reinforce a verbal message by putting it in a different format that can aid the listener.

When using visual support material, information and data should be supplied in a simple, easily absorbed format. Only one idea or concept should be presented per visual aid.

- **Conversation Participation.** Technical professionals should involve the listener in the communication. This can be achieved by asking questions and getting feedback.
- **Positive Environment.** Communications should take place in positive, non-threatening environments. Non-technical professionals may be intimidated by the complexity of the information presented or even begin with the assumption they will not be able to understand it. (2) This can lead to a resistance to even attempt to process the message. From the other spectrum, technical professionals may perceive non-technical people as incapable of absorbing important information, or even approach the communication as having the “upper hand” because of their background and experience. (2) This negativity must be avoided in order to successfully communicate.

4. Communication Focused on Sensory Systems

The customer is processing information from both the external and internal environment during the sales process. Balancing both technical and non-technical spectrums, “they have to filter the flood of data coming at them down to a quantity that can be managed without overloading their nervous systems.” (3) To do this, each person filters the information using his or her preferred sensory

system, which the FTSP must take into account. The FTSP should communicate in the sensory mode the client prefers. This mode can be identified by simply listening to the client. For instance, if a person prefers his or her visual senses, he or she communicates best when visually seeing what a person is working to communicate. If the FTSP cannot match the same method the speaker using, she should use as little sensory language as possible.

CHAPTER 3

FEMALE VS. MALE COMMUNICATION IN SALES

A. Female versus Male Communication Styles

Is there a difference in the way each gender communicates? Some researchers have proposed that each gender has its own language, or dialect of the same language. Biological, functional, and sociological research have been completed in an attempt to explain the differences in gender communication. *Brain Sex* by Ann Moir and David Jessel, stated that exposure to different levels of circulating testosterone before birth caused different brain structures between males and females. (5) Another study, such as that presented in a 1995 *Newsweek* issue says that there are clear differences in how each gender's brain actually function, such as how they process information (5). Sociological differences experienced during childhood and into adult life have also been researched as a cause of this communication difference. A combination of all these factors is could most likely be the reason for the gender communication gap.

Prior to 1900, society widely accepted that a woman's language was different than a man's; it was thought of as inferior. A female that differed from this generalization was tagged "abnormal." (3) Robin Lakeoff proposed a new theory in the 1970's. She proposed that "a specific set of linguistic characteristics could be observed and tested between men and women to distinguish differences." (3) Since that time, numerous studies have been conducted on gender communication. Some of these have

attempted to measure which gender talks more, which gender uses certain phrases, or even which gender interrupts more. In general, all of these studies concluded with ambiguous results.

Using these past studies as a base, scholars have proposed two theoretical models to define gender communication. One model proposed that men and women use two different varieties of English. (3) The second model proposed that during a conversation some speakers use a dominant role while others use a subordinate role. (3)

Stereotypes play a large role in how both women and men perceive each other's communication style as well as the associated actions with the communication. For example, some individuals falsely interpret the subordinate role of the second proposed model with a female speaker. (3)

Researchers viewed and critiqued the effects of the second model and stereotypes during the 1988 vice presidential debate between Geraldine Ferraro and George Bush. Those who analyzed language characteristics during the debate noticed that Bush's speech fit the feminine stereotype, often becoming "high and shrill," wandering "off the subject and into digressions," and making very personal appeals of his audience. Ferraro, on the other hand, demonstrated male speech characteristics throughout the debate. Interestingly, this is not how the debate was reported by the media or even perceived by the audience. (3)

Communication perceptions are based on many different factors, including gender. The following sections present some general language characteristics that can be linked to gender.

1. Female Language Characteristics

- **Apology.** Research indicates that women apologize more than men. Most often, the apology is misinterpreted; women see it as expressing concern or sympathy, while men may see it as admitting guilt or the admission of doing something wrong. (2)
- **Direct.** In general, women are not direct communicators. They tend to be more cautious with their word choice and commonly use qualifiers, disclaimers, and explanations in communication. (5)
- **Facilitative.** Women want to understand what is being communicated to them, and also to be understood. Therefore, they are described as facilitative communicators. A result of this is that communication coming from women is more detailed and descriptive. (5) For women, “communication is often intended to promote inclusion or participation... Frequently the intention is to make a contribution to a group effort.” (2)
- **Rapport.** Females use conversation to connect, commonly sharing information about themselves and about personal aspects of their lives. They do this in order to establish a rapport with the person they are communicating with. Building a professional rapport with a person often involves discussing feelings, sharing thoughts, or validating emotions.

Research indicates that women excel at reading a person's nonverbal behavior and emotions, which aids in building rapport. (5)

- **Silence.** A woman's silence is often perceived as a sign of weakness or uncertainty. In reality, most women use silence to consider communication before responding, and as a way to compose their next communication, instead of just saying the first thing that comes to mind. (2)
- **Technical.** In general, most females are perceived as having a lack of product knowledge (5). Research indicates that females are not as skilled in communicating mechanical or technical product knowledge to their clients. Instead of focusing communication on the mechanical or technical product elements, the female is focusing on building the relationship.
- **Voice.** Women tend to have a higher pitch to their voice; unfortunately, listeners associate this higher pitch with the tone of a child, which can hurt credibility. (3) Besides having a higher pitch, women use varied pitch levels when communicating. This is often described as "emotional" or "melodramatic" because it is not monotone.

2. Male Language Characteristics

- **Apology.** Men tend not to use apologies in everyday communication. To them, an apology during a conversation is putting themselves in a vulnerable position. In addition, men think that by apologizing they will admit to a lack of power or of being in a subordinate position. (2)

- **Direct.** Research has found that men communicate using concise and precise statements that tend to be straight to the point. For the person on the other side of this communication, the conciseness can require that many more additional questions be asked to obtain information needed to continue communicating.
- **Facilitative.** Men tend to not be facilitative communicators; instead, they are competitive communicators. They like to present facts, give advice, and interrupt frequently. Instead of ensuring that all parties are communicating, a man's ultimate goal is to win the communication. For men, "communication is often intended to establish uniqueness or independent entity, not part of the group. Communication is often designed to set them apart." (2)
- **Rapport.** Men are not as relationship focused in their communication. Instead, their goal is to "win" the communication. "Men often approach communication as a game. They expect each party to play by established rules...they are not focused on the long-term "client" relationship; their goal is to win..." (5)
- **Silence.** Men use silence during communication "for emphasis, to demonstrate power, or assert pressure and control." (2)
- **Technical.** Men tend to be more technically oriented in their communication. They focus on objectively sharing information and presenting facts or observations. (2) Males concentrate on the facts and

background associated with the product, and not on building and maintaining a professional relationship. (5)

- **Voice.** The adult male voice has the preferred communication tone. It tends to be deeper, richer, and less nasal than a woman's. Because the male voice lacks the varied pitch levels, it is perceived as having "strength and stability". (3)

B. Gender Communication and Sales

An approach called "Gendersell" has been presented by Judith C. Tingley and Lee E. Robert. The approach focuses on "communication techniques typical of the other gender in order to increase potential influence in sales situations" (5). Each individual client demands a specific approach customized by the salesperson to him or her. A salesperson needs to talk in the language of his or her customer in order to investigate their needs and discover how his or her product can be a solution to their problems.

Female sales professionals feel the "how" of selling is equally important as the "what" of selling. As has been discussed, female sales professionals are seeking to define a connection, or establish rapport. Webster's Dictionary defines rapport as "close relationship; harmony." Gendersell defines this as the "presence of positive, nonsexual chemistry between people" (5). Rapport is a key step in this process. Often if rapport cannot be established, the deal is off or at the very least a step back. This rapport is built when the female sales professional remembers her client's "concerns and needs, pays attention, seems to listen, and values their business" (5).

“The important thing about rapport is that it refers to trust and understanding and good feelings that are mutual...Few things are less linear than rapport.

Unfortunately, this key component is often missing in communication between men and women.” (3)

Gendersell encourages both male and female sales associates to be more aware of the opposite gender’s language characteristic communication preferences. This chapter focused on presenting and explaining these preferences. The next chapter will incorporate these preferences into the FTSP communication approach.

CHAPTER 4

THE FTSP COMMUNICATION APPROACH

The FTSP Communication Approach is a sales language strategy targeted to who the FTSP is communicating with. The approach specifically considers the gender of the client as well as the client's professional background and experience.

Communication similarities and differences based on gender and experience are presented in the following areas:

- General Language Characteristics
- One-to-one Presentation Techniques
- Sales Questioning Using SPIN
- Technical to Non-Technical

A. Similarities in Communication

The basics of communication between an FTSP and her client remain the same regardless of gender and professional experience. Certain language characteristics and one-to-one presentation techniques should be used in every sales approach. In addition, many of the sales questions using the SPIN process should be approached similarly. Techniques presented specifically to help the FTSP communicate with her non-technical clientele can not only be used with non-technical individuals, but to

also improve communication with her overall client base. A summary table of these similarities is presented on page 38.

1. General Language Characteristics

Female sales professionals should never use apologies in any communication unless warranted. Though female clientele will understand unnecessary apologies, it is not professional to use apologies as a communication standard. While female clientele might understand an apology, male clientele might interpret it as a weakness, therefore damaging the FTSP's credibility.

Credibility needs to be built during the sales process between the FTSP and her client. This can be achieved by demonstrating product knowledge and background. The FTSP should gain extensive product knowledge and evaluate possible product applications. Regardless of gender and professional experience, credibility is gained in a sales relationship as an FTSP builds rapport with her client. This involves the FTSP finding a common connection with her client.

Each client will prefer to communicate using a different "sense," and it is the job of the FTSP to discover what "sense" that is. The FTSP can revise her communications, both written and verbal, to focus on this sense. She can discover the "sense" by listening to verbs used by the client, as well as noting items requested. For example: "I just cannot see how the concept will be implemented over time. Can you provide a flow-chart or timeline for reference?"

2. One-to-One Presentation Techniques

The first step in preparing for good communication during a one-to-one presentation is to prepare an agenda. The FTSP should involve the client in determining agenda items and establishing a timeline and limit before a meeting. Communicating with the client prior to the meeting will help the FTSP determine what her client is expecting to gain from the meeting. This communication establishes realistic expectations and goals for both parties.

The FTSP should prepare to communicate the technical information during a meeting using a combination of written documentation and visual aids. This gives the client multiple ways to view and process the information presented, and the FTSP multiple avenues of conveying the presentation material.

Gaining extensive product or service knowledge prior to the presentation is a must for the FTSP. Clients will often want to test a salesperson when it comes to product knowledge. By doing her homework and learning about the product extensively, the FTSP can confidently meet any challenge presented. Confidence will come with experience and practice. Some of the best ways the FTSP can build this confidence is through mentoring and product research.

By having extensive product knowledge, the FTSP also provides herself the background needed to ask specific questions to determine her client's needs. The FTSP should be facilitative throughout the entire presentation. Asking questions ensures that she is conveying her message to the client and that the client is actively participating in the presentation.

The overall success of a sale is directly linked to how the FTSP approaches follow-up with her client. She should anticipate any potential problems the client might experience, and communicate these problems openly to the client. The FTSP should remain direct and specific when communicating with her client at this point in the sales process. A timeline for follow-up with the client should be established at the end of a presentation meeting, and the FTSP should meet the timeline specified. Meeting this timeline can be a large factor in maintaining the relationship.

3. Sales Questions Using SPIN

The following describes the general use of SPIN questions in the client sales communication process:

- **Situation Questions.** The FTSP should use this type of questions with her client during relationship building. This type of question will help the FTSP obtain facts and background information related to her client, including client expectations and company goals. The goal is to establish rapport with the client.
- **Problem Questions.** The FTSP can use problem questions interchangeably with situation questions during relationship building. This allows her to determine the problem the client needs to solve and how her product or service can benefit the client.
- **Implication Questions.** The FTSP should use implication questions during a presentation or meeting to explore the effects of problems defined

while asking problem questions and situation questions. She can explore the client's options to solving the defined problem, pointing out pros and cons to each possible solution.

- **Need Payoff Questions.** The FTSP uses need payoff questions to tie her product or service in as the only solution for the client's defined problem. An example of this is the FTSP showing the client that not only does her product or service solve the client's problem, but in addition it provides extra benefits to the company or service. Another option when using this type of question is for the FTSP let the client discover the solution to the problem, or lead them into why they need the product.

4. Technical to Non-Technical

As mentioned previously, many of these suggestions will not only improve the FTSP's communication with her non-technical clients, but with her clients overall.

The FTSP should set expectations and goals for any communication with her client, whether it is a conference call or formal presentation. Her goal is to achieve an accurate transfer of a limited amount of information that meets the client's needs. Often a non-technical client is simply in need of a product overview or specific information related to a decision-making situation. The client should be involved in determining the level of detail they require. The FTSP can do this by asking them a combination of the following questions (2):

- "I would like to find out how much information you need at this time."

- “I can supply a foundation or background of information and identify resources for you to follow up with to increase your knowledge or understanding. I’ll tell you where you can go to get further information.”
- “I can give you a brief, concise overview, kind of the Cliff Notes version, and then I’ll be happy to respond to your questions or fill in the blanks where necessary.”

The FTSP should then prepare herself for the delivery specified by the client.

A presentation meeting to a non-technical professional should be structured using the 3-step model: Preview, present, and review. (2) First, the FTSP should define what she plans to say during the presentation, or the goal of the presentation. Next, the FTSP should deliver the message outlined during the preview. Finally, the FTSP should summarize what she has presented. This helps her reiterate important facts and points, and ensure that the client has understood the presentation. The 3-step model is also a good way for the FTSP and her client to structure the agenda prior to the meeting.

During the presentation, the FTSP should incorporate simple analogies or examples that her non-technical client will understand because they come from his or her own frame of reference (2). The FTSP can use common themes that she established during the relationship building phase of the sales process. She should avoid projecting opinion as fact; this can be seen as confusing to the non-technical client. Only relevant facts that can be backed up with written documentation should be presented unless the client requests otherwise.

Besides being aware of the auditory information conveyed to the non-technical client, the FTSP should also provide visual support material. This is just another sensory format that can enhance the communication process. Visual support material can help the client focus on the product or service facts by presenting data in a simple, easily absorbed format (2). The intent of the FTSP using visual support material is to reinforce the verbal presentation. The FTSP should keep in mind the following when preparing visual support material (2):

- Limit of one idea per visual.
- Simple format.
- Good graphic quality.

The FTSP should review material that contains visual support material for ideas on presentation. An example of a publication that uses visual support material effectively is *USA Today*.

Finally, a non-technical client will absorb information more readily in a non-threatening, positive environment. The FTSP might choose to use incentives to help create this atmosphere, including providing a prize to those in a meeting who ask questions. Or, a FTSP might choose to start the meeting off with an ice-breaker, such as each attendee providing their own introduction as well as providing a fun fact, such as his or her favorite vacation spot. It often works to the FTSP's advantage to offer to buy the client lunch to eat during the meeting, or to offer to make the meeting a working lunch. The FTSP should let the client

choose the meeting time and place, if possible, or at the very least find a place of neutral ground.

Table 1 FTSP Communication Approach: Similarities in Communication

		Action
General Language Characteristics		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not use apologies. • Build credibility by demonstrating product knowledge and background. • Build rapport. • Communicate using “senses.”
One-to-One Presentation Techniques		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare an agenda. • Use both written documentation and visual aids during presentation. • Demonstrate product knowledge. • Ask questions to encourage discussion. • Follow-up.
Sales Questions Using SPIN	Situation Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use to build relationship. • Obtain facts and background information about client.
	Problem Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine client’s needs.
	Implication / Need Payoff Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore options to solving client’s problem stating all pros and cons to each possible solution. • Show how product solves problem and provides additional benefits. • Help the client discover the solution.
Technical to Non-Technical		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set expectations and goals. • Use 3-step model – preview, present, review. • Use analogies and examples. • Use visual support material. • Present in a positive, non-threatening environment.

B. Differences in Communication: Refining the Approach Based on Gender and Experience

There are distinct differences the FTSP needs to be aware of when communicating with her client directly related to the gender of the client and to his or her professional background. These differences are outlined in detail in the following sections and include general language characteristics, sales questions using SPIN, and technical to non-technical communication. A summary table presented on page 44 can be used as a resource for the FTSP to identify communication differences in her clients.

1. General Language Characteristics

a. Rapport

Because the FTSP is naturally looking to establish a business relationship with her clients, it is often easy and necessary for her to build an emotional connection. (5) How this connection is established is directly related to the gender of the client. To build this rapport, women often proceed more slowly in the sales process than men. (5) This gives the FTSP the opportunity to build the relationship by gathering information and thinking about the client's needs.

When establishing rapport with her female clients, the FTSP often finds a connection focused on feelings, people, or background. (5) Rapport is a key component between females doing business. The FTSP must not only establish the relationship by finding the connection point, but also maintain it.

This is done most easily through follow-up. The FTSP should establish the female client's sales process and follow-up expectations while building the relationship, and then meet them. In addition, the FTSP should not interpret silence during the sales process as an indicator of rapport being broken.

Female clients often use silence during or after a presentation to process and consider the facts and information. (5)

With her male clients, the FTSP should use a slightly different approach to establish rapport. This connection can be established by the FTSP focusing on three topics that generally are of interest to her male customers: business, money, or sports. (5) The FTSP can do this easily by paying close attention to current events. This includes reading the paper, listening to news radio, or paying close attention to television, specifically news and sports channels. (5)

The FTSP will find as she does this that establishing a connection becomes easier and can even be an introduction to product discussion. General conversations between the male client and the FTSP should be focused on the male client's interests.

In addition, understanding a basic gender communication difference can build the FTSP's credibility with male clients. Men often like to talk about things and facts while women would prefer to discuss people and feelings. (5) This re-emphasizes that the FTSP should thoroughly research and understand her product. She should be prepared to give specific facts and data to her male client. Facts and data should be presented verbally, as well as with the aid of visual support material.

b. Direct vs. Facilitative Communication

The FTSP should use a combination of direct language and facilitative language with both her male and female clients.

Female clients will tend to back away from direct communication, instead preferring the inviting language used during facilitative communication. The FTSP should keep conversation with her female client open, but on topic. Direct language can be used to bring a conversation back on topic when it goes astray. Questions used during the conversation can aid in initiating responses and obtaining feedback.

Male clients prefer direct communication, sometimes to a point that facilitative communication is not even used during a conversation. When discussing a product, the FTSP need to resist the urge for a long, drawn out discussion (5), which may cause her male client to lose focus on the conversation. Instead, she needs to state the facts and then as discussion proceeds with her male customer, back those facts up with details as requested by the male client.

2. Sales Questions Using SPIN

The basic approach using the SPIN process is the same for both male and female clientele. There are a few key points the FTSP should take note of though, when using this process:

a. Situation Questions

An initial sales call from the FTSP to her male customer should start with her stating her credentials; this helps in establishing credibility with her male client. (5) The initial call is the opportunity to begin to establish rapport using the information described in “General Language Characteristics” presented previously. The FTSP should concentrate on being very specific and knowledgeable in her product or service description.

b. Problem Questions

Research has found that men’s conversations are often more concise, precise, and to the point. (5) When asked a question, a male client may respond so minimally that the FTSP will need to ask many additional questions to determine his actual needs. The FTSP is expecting her male client to open up to her with one question, as this approach often works well with female clients. Instead, the FTSP needs to prepare multiple questions that will help her establish the male client’s product or service needs. Often, the male client will focus on what he “wants” in a product, as opposed to what he “needs.” (5) The FTSP’s challenge is to focus on the male client’s “wants,” and then in addition show him how the product meets his “needs.”

c. Implication Questions and Need Payoff Questions

The key with both implication questions and need payoff questions when the FTSP is communicating with a female client is to not push the sale. The FTSP should let the female client be involved in determining implications and discovering the additional benefits the product or service can offer the

company. This keeps the meeting in a facilitative mode, which females prefer. On the other hand, a male client will want to move to the next phase in the sales process quicker than his female counterpart. The FTSP should anticipate this, and prepare for each phase in advance.

3. Technical to Non-Technical

The FTSP's interaction with a male non-technical professional can be challenging. "Some men would rather "walk" than reveal their lack of information." (2) In this situation it is important for the FTSP to be perceived as non-threatening to her client. The FTSP can achieve this by initially asking open-ended, low risk questions, letting the male non-technical professional reveal his product knowledge, and what he would like to investigate about the product. (5) This is also a good initial approach with female non-technical professionals. Non-technical clients, in general, are more likely to feel comfortable with a FTSP that exhibits confidence when discussing her product or service. (2)

Table 2: FTSP Communication Approach: Gender Refined

		Female Professionals	Male Professionals
General Language Characteristics	Rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find connection based on feelings, people, and background. Maintain relationship through follow-up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find connection using business, money, and sports. General conversations should be focused on client's interests. Discuss things and facts about product to establish credibility.
	Direct vs. Facilitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use facilitative language. Direct language should be used to keep conversation on topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use direct language. Facilitative language should be used as the client requests discussion.
Sales Questions Using SPIN	Situation Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish rapport. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State credentials. Establish rapport. Demonstrate product knowledge.
	Problem Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One problem question usually leads to facilitative discussion that identifies client's needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipate asking multiple questions to determine the client's product need. Weight client "wants" as high as "needs."
	Implication / Need Payoff Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not push the sale. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipate a quicker sales cycle.
Technical to Non-Technical		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exhibit confidence. Use very facilitative language. Ask open-ended, low risk questions; let the client do the talking. 	

CHAPTER 5

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

The research compiled in this paper has just scratched the surface of the gender communication issues to explore when related to professional experience in the technical sales industry. Future research items might include:

- Applying this research across sales industries.
- Analyzing communication in a specific technical sales industry, such as software sales, hardware sales, or sales of technical services.
- Comparing gender communication between sales colleagues to gender communication between a sales associate and a client.
- Developing a communication approach for the male technical sales professional.
- Interviewing and observing technical sales professionals interacting with their clientele.
- Developing a gender communication training program for technical sales professionals.

GLOSSARY

FTSP (Female Technical Sales Professional): A female graduate of an accredited engineering program whose occupation involves the sale of high-tech products or services.

SPIN Selling: A sales technique utilizing situation questions, problem questions, implication questions, and need-payoff questions.

High-Value Sale: An individual sale worth a dollar amount greater than \$1,000 and that most likely involves a number of decision makers who will be held accountable by the end-users for the success of the product.

Commitment: Determining the next step in the sales process with the customer.

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